

“Watching for Surprises”

a sermon by the Reverend Marsha E. Brown,

Pastor of New Horizons Presbyterian Church and Executive Director of Ritenour Co-Care Inc.,

a 501c3 non-profit Food Pantry and Community Development.

John 20: 1-18

FOCUS: Watching for God in the surprises of our lives

FUNCTION: Encourage us to expect and recognize God in serendipity

The story of Easter is known far and wide. The celebration of Easter Sunday is something many of us hold dear as the center of our faith. This week we know that Jesus suffered at the hands of those who did not understand his countercultural teachings that included all people into God’s realm. Even people who were of different ethnic origins and beliefs were part of God’s family. He showed that through interactions with Gentiles and Samaritans and all those who were considered ‘sinners’ in their day- and ours. Although we all know- I hope- that we are ALL sinners and we are ALL forgiven- no matter what. We need to be reminded of that. There is no Christian club that gets us into heaven for our beliefs. Jesus called us to love our neighbor and that was radical and he paid a price for it. God, however, used that human evil for good purposes- to show us love and forgiveness and salvation that begins here and now.

Let us again listen to the story of Mary coming to the tomb on that early Easter morning: Listen for God’s Word to you in the 20th chapter of John 20:1-18 in the New Revised Standard Version.

“20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^[b] “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene

went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A friend of mine told me the other day, after a lifetime of searching for ways of understanding how we experience God, that he has come to the realization that God comes to us in moments of serendipity. This was a major awareness for him. And it may be for you. Some people talk about spiritual moments of feeling God with them, an indescribable feeling that happens to many. But this serendipity- the awareness that things are happening around you in a way to bring about something that collaborates or works together that you never would have imagined is probably the most common way God, through the Holy Spirit, works. Have you ever had that? People you meet that you need to meet for one reason or another- maybe connected to the path that God is pulling you? Information that comes to you just as you need it for some project you are doing that you feel you are called to? People who show up to help just when you need help? It is like some higher order to the world that we are usually unaware of- until we have this serendipity in our lives and then we know that God really is with us-providing for us when we are least aware.

Here we have Mary at the tomb looking for Jesus’ body to put spices on it..... and the rock is rolled away and his body is not there. What would she think except that someone had stolen his body or animals had eaten it? Then, later when she was alone in the garden, the mistaken gardener spoke to her – her name- and she recognized him as Jesus. It was a surprise that could not have been imagined. And only the intimate relationship that they had could have

helped her to realize who it was by his voice. Then she became the first apostle- yes- the first apostle- by running to the disciples and announcing that Jesus was alive. (You might have noticed that almost no one calls her the first apostle—but that is another sermon).

Mary was not ready for the surprise that God had for her that day in the garden- it took her by surprise.

God frequently comes to us in surprises. They may be good ones, or bad ones, but God comes to us all the time. If we are listening, we may perceive God and take in the learning and love that is intended in that connection. If we are not expecting God in our lives, we will probably miss it.

No matter what our age, or our situation, God is there for us. Bringing us love and acceptance and grace abundant. This is the good news that we are to share with all our brothers and sisters of this world. Eternal life begins here and now-when we are realizing God's serendipity and love in our everyday lives. Amen.